

Eric H. Monkkonen

Homicide in Los Angeles, 1827–2002 The history of homicide has slowly grown from the work of a handful of medievalists to an international enterprise, engaging historians, legal scholars, and sociologists. Much of their work focuses on measuring homicide rates, which can be done with more accuracy than theory might have predicted. Other kinds of crime remain hard, or impossible, to assess because of poor reporting, but homicides turn out to have been consistently recorded in many societies.¹

Eric H. Monkkonen—a long-time contributor to, and friend of, this journal—wrote this article before his untimely death on May 30, 2005. We mourn his loss and greatly value his scholarship. At the time of this writing, he was Professor of History, University of California, Los Angeles. He was the author of *Crime, Justice, History* (Columbus, 2002); *Murder in New York City* (Berkeley, 2001).

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1 Charles Gross, *Select Cases from the Coroners' Rolls, A. D. 1265–1413, with a Brief Account of the History of the Office of Coroner* (London, 1896); Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Violent Death in Fourteenth- and Early Fifteenth-Century England," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XVIII (1976), 297–320; James Buchanan Given, *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England* (Stanford, 1977); Carl I. Hammer, Jr., "Patterns of Homicide in a Medieval University Town: Fourteenth-Century Oxford," *Past and Present*, 78 (1978), 3–23. Roger Lane pioneered American research in *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); *idem* (ed.), "Special Issue: Bloody Murder," *Social Science History*, XXV (2001); Elizabeth Dale, "Not Simply Black and White," 7–27; Jeffrey S. Adler, "Halting the Slaughter of the Innocents," 29–52; Monkkonen, "Estimating the Accuracy of Historic Homicide Rates," 53–66; Douglas Eckberg, "Stalking the Elusive Homicide," 67–91; Mary Beth Emmerichs, "Getting Away with Murder?" 93–100; Randolph Roth, "Child Murder in New England, 101–147." Monkkonen, "New Standards for Historical Violence Research," *Crime, History, Society* (Switzerland), V (2001), 5–26; Eric A. Johnson and Monkkonen (eds.), *The Civilization of Crime: Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages* (Urbana, 1996).

Homicide rates have declined steadily since the Middle Ages, neither industrialization nor urbanization having had the expected negative consequences. This unexpected finding, which is continually reaffirmed as more studies are completed, has spurred greater efforts and more sophisticated work. In addition, the findings have raised difficult and unpredicted theoretical questions. In 1980, Soman proposed a new thesis, *violence au vol* (from violence to theft), arguing that the decline in homicides was paralleled by a rise in theft, in part because there was more to steal. Three other theories, all of them persuasive, have had their advocates. One, developed by Elias, and articulated well before the evidence existed, is known as the “civilizing process.” It argues that individual behaviors slowly changed with the rise of courtly society in an entirely voluntary process. This theory has the advantage of accounting for individual changes without insisting on formal social control efforts. Others advocate for Weber’s overview of growing bureaucracies and social order leading to more orderly, less angry, and less impulsive behavior. The third approach, which is relevant to the early modern and modern periods, is informed by Foucault’s work, in particular his argument that power and control in society moved from the imposition of external regulations by the monarch to the internalized rules of ordinary people. The debates surrounding these theories do not appear to permit simple resolution, but they do not impair empirical work.²

The course of homicide in the United States poses a problem for theory and broad generalizing. The high rates of the past few decades signal an appalling difference with Canada and Western

2 Manuel Eisner, “Modernization, Self-Control and Lethal Violence: The Long-Term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective,” *The British Journal of Criminology*, LXI (2001), 618–638; Thomas W. Gallant, “Honor, Masculinity, and Ritual Knife Fighting in Nineteenth-Century Greece,” *American Historical Review*, CV (2000), 359–382; Alfred Soman, “Deviance and Criminal Justice in Western Europe, 1300–1800: An Essay in Structure,” *Criminal Justice History*, I (1980), 1–28; Anne Parrella, “Industrialization and Murder: Northern France, 1815–1904,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXII (1992), 627–654; Norbert Elias (trans. Edmund Jephcott), *The Civilizing Process* (New York, 1878–1982), 2v.; Max Weber (trans., edited, and with an intro. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1958); Michel Foucault (trans. Alan Sheridan), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977). See also the special issue “Long-Term Trends in Violence,” *Crime, History & Societies*, V (2001): Roth, “Homicide in Early Modern England, 1549–1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis,” 33–67; Helmut Thome, “Explaining Long Term Trends in Violent Crime,” 69–86; Pieter Spierenburg, “Violence and the Civilizing Process: Does It Work?” 87–105.

Europe. Zimring, in *Crime is Not the Problem*, highlights the difference, showing that American violence—not other crimes like theft—is the primary way in which the United States differs from other Western nations. The high, and growing, twentieth-century rates in the United States contradict what theory predicts, and European reality suggests. None of the theory that grounds historical research accounts for the difference.

The research reported herein was designed with current debates and puzzles in mind. It covers an important city that has been a part of two nations, Mexico and the United States. Based on individual observations, the study looks at age, sex, race, and weaponry. It showcases a place that had differed from other American places but that by the late-twentieth century, had come to exemplify the broader American patterns of homicide. The results contribute to the historical debates and syntheses as well as broaden the American base of case studies.³

Since its origin as a small Mexican outpost surrounded by ranches, the city and county of Los Angeles have preserved their homicide records in various formats. During a 175-year period, Los Angeles and its surrounding county of farms, vineyards, ranches, and villages has documented its homicides in the *alcalde's* (mayor, coroner, and, in the Mexican period, judge) files, newspapers, court records, coroners' registers, police notebooks, and, beginning in 1968, Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Supplementary Homicide Reports. These sources are scattered in such places as the Robbery/Homicide Division of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the office of the Los Angeles Department of Coroner, the Seaver Center, the Huntington Library, UCLA's Young Research Library (on microfilmed newspapers), and the Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The most extensive record is the Coroner's register, beginning in 1894, and the second most extensive is the LAPD's Robbery/Homicide Division register, beginning in 1899. Both are continuous to the present. The FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) are continuous since 1968. All of the sources record, at varying levels of completeness, the fates of individual homicide victims—nearly 55,000 by 2002.

3 Roth et al., "The Historical Violence Database," <http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/cjrc/hvd/> (visited Jan. 1, 2005); Monkkonen, "The Problem of American Homicide," *American Historical Review* (forthcoming).

On the basis of this patchwork history, we can *begin* to understand how a beautiful and prosperous region can become tainted with vicious, lethal crime. Beginning is the best that we can do at this point because social scientists, historians, and other scientists cannot yet fully explain the causes of homicide, nor what works in its suppression. The facts are elusive, the theories and hypotheses unconnected and speculative, and the data difficult to compile. Only New York City has a longer annual series, covering two centuries. Although this article details the sources and outlines the vagaries of the homicide rate in one major American metropolis, it contributes to the understanding of the United States as a whole, over a long time span. As an overview, it raises as many questions as it answers.⁴

Los Angeles is now a county with a population of nearly 10 million, its largest city numbering about 4 million, containing eighty-eight different and contiguous municipalities. The county, which itself has a total population of 1 million, provides such services as police and fire protection, education, and libraries for several cities. The political boundaries between cities and county are virtually undistinguishable, often only told by a change in the color of street signs (those in the City of Los Angeles are a deep blue). This article takes the county as its frame of reference, despite the fact that its dramatic shifts from rural to urban to metropolitan may stretch the point of such consistency. Further analysis may well break down this all-encompassing reach, but a first, broad overview is essential to draw long-term perspectives.

The county originated as a classic Christallerian geographical region—a small urban center networked with towns and a large agricultural hinterland. By the mid-twentieth century, however, it had become a futurist miscellany and overlay of governments. Some of its cities are self-contained units with their own institutions, whereas others—under the Lakewood plan of 1954—purchase classic urban services from the county or mix municipal and county services. Today, the county board of supervisors' five members may be the most powerful politicians in the country. The City of Los Angeles attracts more notoriety than, say, Glen-

4 Monkkenon, *Murder in New York City* (Berkeley, 2001).

dale, simply because to give all governments equal attention would be impossible. To live in Los Angeles can, and usually does, mean many different things. The complexity of the county's political makeup has generated a multiplicity of sources that can be used for long-term data reconstruction. The Appendix lists the variegated sources consulted for this article.⁵

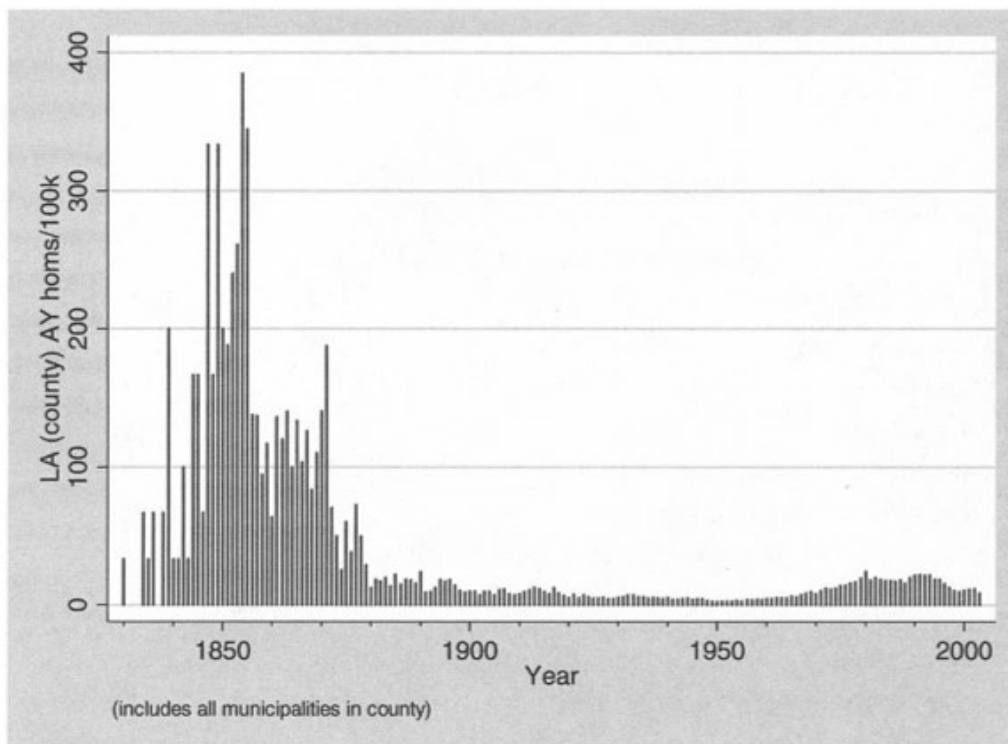
This complexity does not hide the boundary-crossing nature of homicide. Criminal offenders do not pause to check which exact city is the site of their illegal activity. Whether a death occurs on a chicken farm in Arcadia, a drinking spot near downtown Los Angeles, or in wealthy Brentwood, the world learns about it as a death in Los Angeles. The bad reputation that leaks out of the region taints everything that happens today, as it did in the mid-nineteenth century.

Figure 1 plots the homicides in the population per 100,000 from 1830 to 2002. When Los Angeles was small, it took only two or three homicides to generate a huge per capita rate. As the city started to grow rapidly, so too did the number of homicides. The large lump at the first part of the graph represents the total of 449

5 Eckberg explains capture-recapture sampling in "Stalking the Elusive Homicide." On the history of the Los Angeles Coroner, see Tony Blanche and Brad Schreiber, *Death in Paradise: An Illustrated History of the Los Angeles County Department of Coroner* (Los Angeles, 1998). No one who has worked with the region's local archives would be so foolish as to claim absolute thoroughness. The data used herein provide a start, and it is my hope that they will be amended and improved by scholars in the future. The data are organized in two ways. First, the individual homicides are organized around victims because, although around 40% of offenders are never formally identified or arrested, victims are difficult to ignore. Since the 1860s, the coroner has had the task of investigating and recording all deaths that are not by natural causes in the county, thus making its records the most thorough. Infanticides are excluded from this study; only recently have child deaths been systematically investigated and recorded by medical experts. Discrepancies between the otherwise reliable police and coroner records in counts of individual data were usually slight. In such cases, the sources were coded separately so that future users of the data may estimate the numbers missed by both, using capture-recapture sampling. This article simply combines the two sets since the individual names of victims ensure that duplication will not occur.

The second data set—annual counts and rates for the City of Los Angeles and for the whole county, including all of its cities—derives from published official sources as much as possible: the departments of public health, which maintains the vital statistics, and occasionally the coroner and the Los Angeles Police Department. The FBI also reports annual counts in the Uniform Crime Reports (1930 to the present). Because neither individual-level nor published data are fully available for 1922, estimations are based on the number of individual homicides for the four available months. Occasionally the official sources for the annual counts differed from individual observations, in which case I take the higher to be the more likely. Both data sets will be available at the ICPSR and Historical Violence Database.

Fig. 1 Homicide Rates in Los Angeles, 1830–2002



SOURCE See Appendix.

people who were murdered between 1830 and 1880. No single explanation accounts for this extreme violence, but its persistence from the Mexican period through four decades of the American era hints that neither nation nor national culture alone accounts for murder rates. The rising trajectory from 1830 to 1860 may simply represent the popularity of the newly invented revolver spreading into an already violent setting. Such violence has long tainted Los Angeles' history. By the end of the nineteenth century, Los Angeles' countywide homicide rates were still high, but no longer as extreme as they were at mid-century. Rates averaged higher than 11 per 100,000 for the two decades around the turn-of-the-nineteenth century, a figure about 1.5 times that of the whole United States and three times more than that of New York City. A more precise comparison, using age standardization and focusing on just the city shows that Los Angeles' rate far exceeded that of other major cities at the time, including Liverpool, San Francisco, Chicago, and St. Louis. The Los Angeles of small city

western violence began to gel as a metropolis, carrying with it a tradition of homicide.⁶

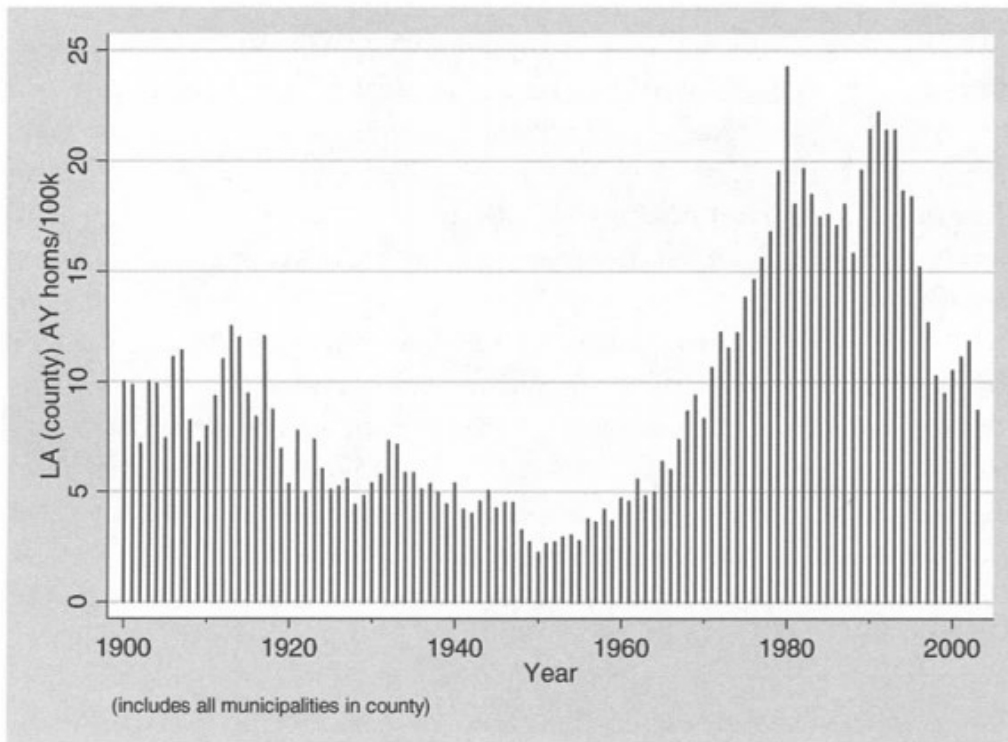
Los Angeles became a complex city as the railroad network tied in the villages and towns throughout the nation and the county. In 1900, the city's population was greater than 100,000; the larger county had reached 1 million by 1921. The port of Long Beach, also in the county but not incorporated until 1897, had nearly 5 million local train passengers per year during the next two decades. By 1920, the City of Los Angeles had a population well over one-half million. Trains arrived constantly from cities across the United States, connecting with inter-urban railways as well as cars and trucks. Recognition of the region's unique urban form took longer: Not until 1967 did Warner place it firmly in America's urban historical landscape in his *Urban Wilderness* and, to this day, most Americans still do not appreciate that the size and shape of the city makes it one of the densest metropolitan areas in the United States. In recent years, a "Los Angeles School" of urban analysis has emerged, perhaps signaling a growing recognition of the region's nontraditional urban character. The twentieth-century metropolis has evolved from intellectual marginality to become a paradigm of the "future city."⁷

Figure 2, focusing on the twentieth century, illuminates a somewhat different situation—homicide rates high at the beginning and end of the century. Counterintuitively, the rates were lowest during the Depression and from the end of World War II until the mid-1960s. Neither population growth nor politics would have predicted this pattern. Other American cities followed similar trajectories, but with lesser extremes. The decline in homicides during the Depression has been noted before, but never explained. Homicide rates during California's "Golden Age" of the

6 I have discussed the period between 1830 and 1880, its data sources and high homicide rates, elsewhere. Monkkenen, "Western Homicide: The Case of Los Angeles, 1830–1875," *Pacific Historical Review* (forthcoming); "Homicide in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago," *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, XCII, (2003), 101–114 (for age rates).

7 *Idem*, "New Standards." For inter-urban railway traffic see <http://www.erha.org/peslbll.htm> (visited Jan. 20, 2005). Sam Bass Warner, *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York, 1972). For the "Los Angeles School," see Michael J. Dear and Steven Flusty, "The Resistable Rise of the LA School" (2003), <http://www.usc.edu/dept/geography/SC2/sc2/pdf/chapter1.pdf> (visited Jan. 20, 2005). Donald J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York, 1997), captures the suburban/urban/village/metropolis flavor of the region in an evocative yet precise sweep. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (eds.), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1996).

Fig. 2 Homicide Rates in Los Angeles, Twentieth Century



SOURCE See Appendix.

1950s were appropriately low. Nothing in the city's, or in the larger county's, history suggests the cause of this pattern. The nineteenth-century pattern conforms to the stereotype of the "Wild West," but the criminal quiescence of post-World War II Los Angeles is a surprise. After all, this era witnessed the popularity of Hollywood depictions of private acts of crime and violence in the genre known as *film noir* (for example, the adaptation of Raymond Chandler's enormously popular novel, *The Big Sleep* [New York, 1939], to film in 1946).

What was responsible for these low rates of the mid-twentieth century—high employment, housing shortages, stay-at-home moms, stay-at-home dads, a dramatic decline in the number of young men, large baby-boomer families, a new investment in such state infrastructure as law enforcement, and/or a deliberate shunning of violence by returning soldiers? Or was it the "global optimism" that Modell suggested? Wherever the responsibility lay, what accounted for the subsequent upturn in killings in the mid-

1960s and the subsequent decline in social capital and civic involvement?⁸

Devising a test for such variables would be difficult, if not impossible, but to the extent that gun usage is related to wartime experience, the statistics are suggestive. Gun usage in homicides declined from a high of 85 to 90 percent at the turn of the century to about 50 percent during the post-World War II era, before escalating again after the Kennedy years. Overall, gun usage in homicides has increased from a mid-nineteenth century high of 50 percent, with two notable peaks in the twentieth century—one in the 1920s and one in the 1990s. Figure 3 plots these changes: Note that the lowest point is still high at 50 percent and that the two long high eras are well above national gun rates (68 percent in 2002). Although gun usage does not explain the high rates or the peaks and valleys, it cannot be ignored as a factor.⁹

Demographics certainly made a difference: The percentage of at-risk men, aged eighteen to thirty-nine, in the total population dropped from 17.8 percent in 1940 to 16 percent in 1950, suggesting that 10 to 20 percent of the drop was simply a change in population. The first years of the baby boom inaugurated an increase in the proportion of children in the general population. Men willingly raising children within the context of family may have been less prone to violence.¹⁰

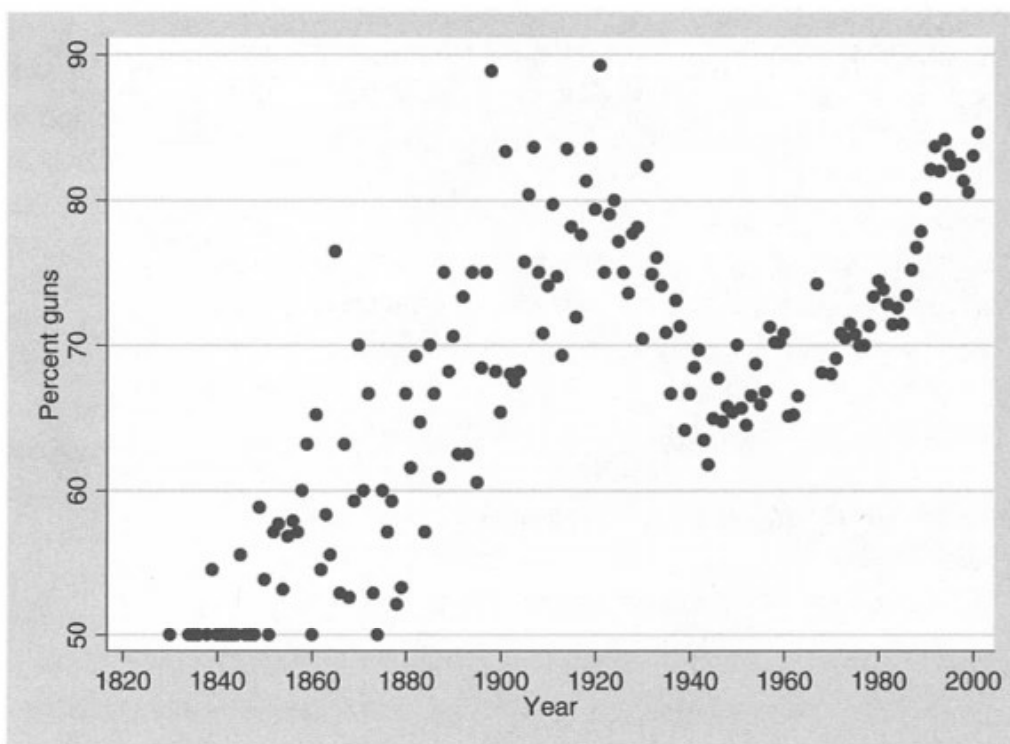
Unfortunately, the FBI data do not code victims' birthplaces,

8 John Modell, Marc Goulden, and Sigurdur Magnusson, "World War II in the Lives of Black Americans: Some Findings and Interpretation," *Journal of American History*, LXXVI (1989), 838–848; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2001); Matthew R. Lee and John P. Bartkowski, "Civic Participation, Regional Subcultures, and Violence: The Differential Effects of Secular and Religious Participation on Adult and Juvenile Homicide," *Homicide Studies*, VIII (2004), 5–39; Malcolm Gladwell, "Getting Over It: The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit Put the War behind Him. Why Can't We?" *New Yorker*, 8 Nov. 2004; Modell et al., "World War II in the Lives of Black Americans."

9 Canada's current gun homicides are about 25 percent; those of the United States are about 68 percent (<http://www.jointogether.org/gv/news/summaries/reader/0,2061,567068,00.html>, visited Jan. 26, 2005). The figure for the United States is calculated from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/weaponstab.htm> (visited Jan. 20, 2005).

10 The calculations are based on 1% samples from the University of Minnesota's Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (<http://www.ipums.umn.edu/>, visited Jan. 25, 2005). The analysis of family and children's risk of being involved in crime is a topic with great potential. For the possible effect of voluntary child "wantedness" and homicide, see John J. Donohue III and Steven D. Levitt, "The Impact of Legalized Abortion on Crime," Stanford Law School, Public Law Working Paper No. 1; Stanford Law & Economics Olin Working Paper No. 204; University of California, Berkeley, Law & Economics Paper No. 200 (2000).

Fig. 3 Percentage of Homicides Using Guns in Los Angeles



NOTE Origin is not zero.

SOURCE See Appendix.

but the pre-1967 data do. (Few offender birthplaces were coded in any source.) Of the victims, 20 percent died without a known place of birth, about 13 percent were native Californians, and an astounding 67 percent were migrants from other places, mainly in the United States. The many foreigners who died in Los Angeles comprised a small proportion of the total, less than 10 percent. Being a migrant from outside of California did not automatically indicate a lack of civic embeddedness, but it strongly suggests it. Furthermore, the notion that Los Angeles supported a culture of violence is questionable: Many more non-Angelenos died than did locals. The city had weak civic, governmental, and law enforcement structures as well as a tolerance of violence. In these conditions, residents of the city acted out their troubled responses.

Though this article does not present anecdotal evidence, it should be noted that a huge number of the sensational murders in the pre-1967 era were committed by people raised elsewhere. For example, William Edward Hickman—the abductor and murderer

of Marian Parker—grew up in Missouri, and Harvey M. Glatman—the Lonely Hearts Killer—grew up in Denver. Among the most notorious victims, Elizabeth Short, “The Black Dahlia,” came from Massachusetts. An analysis of other offenders’ and victims’ birthplaces might be more revealing, but few of them were recorded, except in the high-profile cases.

Los Angeles homicides have often attracted hyperbolic media attention. Far more is written about these exceptional cases than about the humdrum daily violence, in part because of the city’s print media and its strong presence in film media, from movies to newsreels. For example, in 1924 a sordid love triangle involving a small chicken farmer became a glamorous and romantic mystery, featuring photos of the well-dressed principals. The media transformed Elizabeth Short, unemployed and probably a prostitute, into the glamorous Black Dahlia. In 2003, Short became the subject of a best-selling book. In this media capital, at least one medical examiner achieved the macabre sobriquet of “coroner to the stars” for examining the bodies of well-known figures like Marilyn Monroe, Natalie Wood, John Belushi, and others who came to tragic ends.¹¹

An unanticipated problem that emerged from this project’s data-collection process hints at an explanation for the city’s violence. For a long time, many people in Los Angeles were killed in what might be called street justice, half of the time by citizens. The problem is whether these “justifiable” homicides should be included in the total. The district attorney or coroner deemed almost 7 percent (3,345 deaths) of victims to be deserving of their fate. Law-enforcement officials, including police officers, guards, and deputies, were responsible for about 50 percent of these “justifiabiles.” Even if this number is high, the victims were certainly made aware of the lethal power of law enforcement officers. In citizen killings, when violence was unexpected, the protective arm of the state clearly neglected to protect the victims. That many citizens were ready to kill indicates a constant state of danger

11 Steve Hodel, *Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius For Murder* (New York, 2003); Cecelia Rasmussen, “Amateur Sleuth Unravels a Depression-Era Mystery,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Jan. 2005, B-3; Thomas T. Noguchi, with Joseph DiMona, *Coroner at Large* (New York, 1985). See “High Profile Twice Cost ‘Coroner to the Stars’ His Job,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Jan. 2005. For those so inclined, Noguchi has a DVD, “Autopsy: Voices of Death” (2005), \$21.95, at <http://msprozac.zoovy.com/product/autreddvd> (visited Jan. 1, 2005).

as well as the inability of authorities to ensure safety; that most of these citizen killers used guns (85 percent) suggests an armed population, some of whom may have been waiting for their chance.

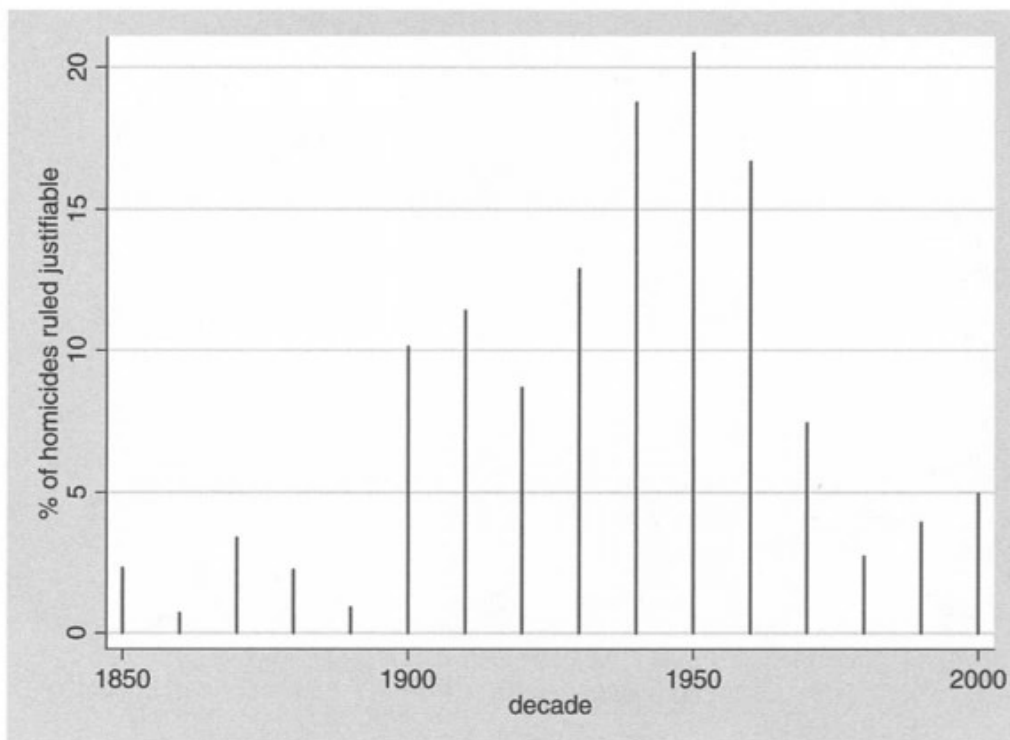
Law-enforcement officers committed more justifiabiles than citizens did—at least 1,735. Whether this is a reasonable number is difficult to say. Miller, writing about the mid-nineteenth-century American and British police, made an important distinction between what appeared on first glance to be similar systems. American officers expected little support from the formal justice system and were far more likely to dispense “street justice,” whereas the British police saw themselves as a part of a larger, constitutional system. The British police expected an arrest to result in a trial and conviction whereas on the streets of American cities, the police felt that they were on their own. The difference may still persist: In the United States, the bureaucratic distance between district attorneys and law-enforcement officials is vast, and the police are envisioned as being on the frontline.¹²

Has there always been a high tolerance for such “do-it-yourself justice” in Los Angeles? Figure 4 plots justifiable homicides, by decade. The vertical bars show the percentage of justifiable homicides, the numerals by the bars being the number killed. The peak proportion of justifiabiles occurred in the 1940s, just before the decline in rates. Did these occasions of street justice help to drive down the overall homicide rates? The greatest number occurred more recently, in the boom years of the 1980s and 1990s. The implication is significant: The region entered the twenty-first century with a considerable number of executions left to the discretion of the 1,300 individuals who happened to be armed at the moment of need.

Race, class, sex, and age all have had differing impacts on homicide rates at various times. Because no class indicators routinely appear in the records, class can be reflected only by race. The way in which age, sex, and race distribute among Los Angeles murderers and victims presents few surprises (see Figure 5). Most murderers were young men, about one in five victims were women, and, until recently, white people dominated the ranks of victims and killers. Several recent studies argue that evolutionary strategy, not

12 Wilbur R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830–1870* (Chicago, 1977).

Fig. 4 Percentage of Justifiable Homicides in Los Angeles, by Decade



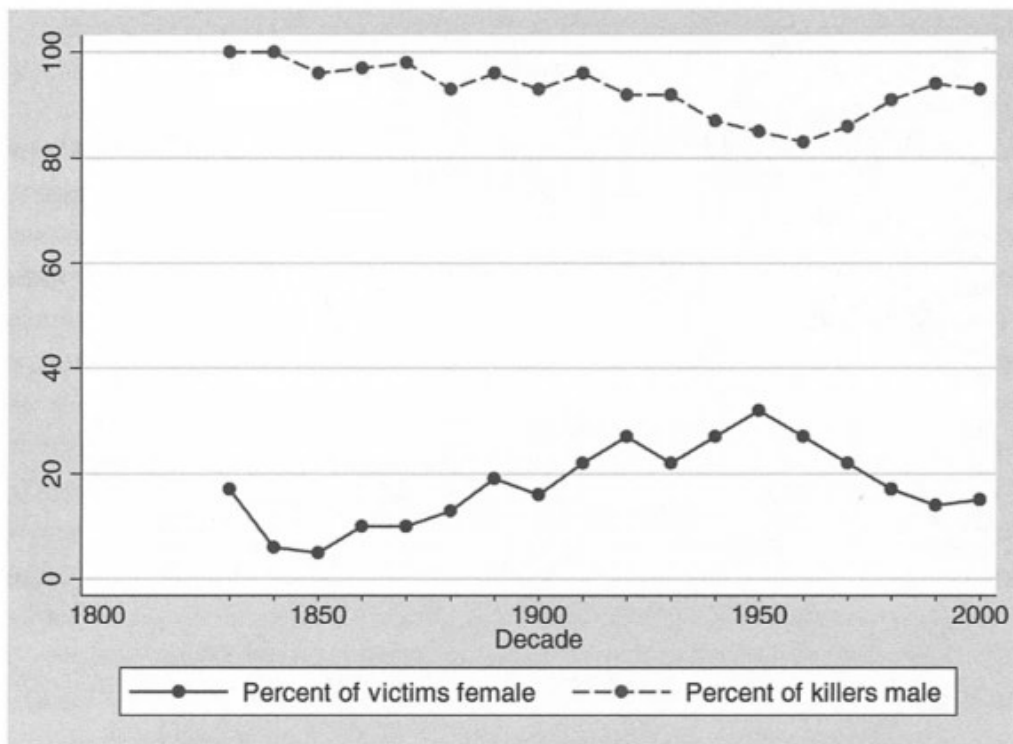
SOURCE See Appendix.

testosterone, accounts for the predominance of young men in the statistics. Daly and Wilson's landmark work, *Homicide*, stands as the most authoritative empirical/theoretical account for these otherwise baffling differences between the sexes so far as homicide is concerned. From 1830 to 2002, 91 percent of Los Angeles' killers were men and 18 percent of its victims were women. The peak year for women as homicide victims, 1950, is deceptive, since it occurred within a time frame that witnessed relatively few homicides. The large proportion of male offenders during the nineteenth century fits the image of a violent, men's town. What these variations do not explain is the wide sweep in changing overall rates as shown in Figures 1 and 2.¹³

Racial differences still present challenges to criminologists: Perhaps the most important discovery of long-term homicide in-

13 Deborah Blum, *Sex on the Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men and Women* (New York, 1997); Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Homicide* (New York, 1988); Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (New York, 1999).

Fig. 5 Sex of Victims and Killers in Los Angeles, 1800–2000



SOURCE See Appendix.

vestigations is that racial and ethnic differences vary over time, suggesting the importance of short-term subcultural/historical differences rather than a deeper persistence of age and gender. Class and wealth differences play a significant role in shaping race and ethnic involvement in homicides, but untangling these variables even from the best data is difficult. This study has to rely on a single variable, the race of victims and offenders, though occasionally ethnicity is available.¹⁴

African-Americans have always had a limited presence in Los Angeles, along with various Asian and Mexican families. But World War II marked a watershed in African-American immigration to Los Angeles, as industrial growth attracted more and more workers. Toward the end of the century, Mexican, Central American, and Asian immigration combined to change what had once

14 Darnell F. Hawkins (ed.), *Ethnicity, Race, and Crime: Perspectives across Time and Place* (Albany, 1995).

been a predominantly white, Protestant city into the diverse, multiracial place that it is today. Until the World War II decade, most killers and victims were white—at least 50 percent of them and probably more. After the war, whites still comprised more than half of the victims, but African-Americans increased their share dramatically, from 6 percent to 35 percent. The latter figure may come as a surprise to those who think of contemporary homicide solely as a black problem.¹⁵

Compared to a similar series of homicide rates for New York, those for Los Angeles reveal a much more dangerous city in almost every time period. Will most American places show a similarly persistent pattern of long-term rates, whether high or low? Were homicide rates in, say, North Dakota or Massachusetts always low, or those in the South and the far West always high? Regional differences may ultimately be difficult to explain and therefore to change. Can Los Angeles accept its history and change it? Overturning a century-and-a-half of violence is a Herculean task. Given the dozens of municipalities, and county departments, involved, an integrated approach, like that in other nations, seems highly improbable. Policy proposals for homicide reduction seldom bring together the various elements of the public health and justice systems. Operation Cease Fire, the successful experiment in Boston during the 1990s, is an exception to the rule. But Boston is a small city with a long tradition of low violence rates.

The chief of police in the City of Los Angeles at the time of this writing is determined to enlist resources and agencies into a concerted effort to reduce homicides. Will various other agencies be able to join this effort on a long-term basis? Can the effort be made permanent, turning around such a long tradition? Why should smaller and less visible agencies even be interested in it? After all, the payoff in homicide reduction is a hope, not a promise. The same irresponsible attitude multiplies across the nation. Maybe it is a clue to how traditions persist. With regard to homicide, political responsibility in a federal state is so diffuse that only "issue entrepreneurs" (and precious few of them) would bother to assume it. In 2003, homicide rates declined to 8.7 percent, as low

15 Lawrence DeGraff, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930," *Pacific Historical Review*, XXXIX (1970), 323-352.

as they were in the late 1960s, but nowhere near the rates in the 1940s and 1950s. A nearly two-century-old crisis continues. How can a practice tolerated for so long not be considered normal?¹⁶

APPENDIX: LOS ANGELES HOMICIDE SOURCES

LOS ANGELES DEPT OF CORONER: Register of Inquests (1894–1967).

HUNTINGTON LIBRARY MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS: Los Angeles Area Court Records, Los Angeles District Court, Criminal: Register of Actions Criminal, vol. 1; Los Angeles Criminal Cases (1861–1879) [boxes 1–24]. List of Civil and Criminal Cases presented in Los Angeles, March 1847 – June 1850 (in Spanish).

SEAVER CENTER, LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY: Alcalde Court Records (1830–1850), Criminal, Finding Guide by Miraslava Chavez. Because these records are trial documents and, in a few cases, deal with the exhumation of bodies, they are more complete than court records. Los Angeles County Court Records [Criminal, includes Justices, District and Session courts] (1850–1860). This is the first decade of the series continued at the Huntington.

NEWSPAPERS: *Los Angeles Star* (film, missing issues) (1851 – ?); *Los Angeles Daily News* (film) reel 1 (1869–1872); *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 4, 1881 – present); *Daily California Chronicle*, 30 Dec. 1854; *Los Angeles Daily News* (1871); *Los Angeles Herald*; *Los Angeles Daily Herald* (Oct. 1873–22 Mar. 1890).

MISCELLANEOUS PUBLICATIONS: Harris Newmark (ed. Maurice H. and Marco R. Newmark), *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853–1913: Containing the Reminiscences of Harris Newmark* (Los Angeles, 1984); Horace Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger* (Los Angeles, 1927), 13 (“The year ‘53 showed an average mortality from fights and assassinations of over one per day in Los Angeles. In the year last referred to, police statistics showed a greater number of murders in California than in all the United States besides, and a great number in Los Angeles than in all of the rest of California” [no source cited]); Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1884–1890), III, V; Los Angeles Dept. of Health, *Annual Report of the Department of Health of the City of Los Angeles, California* (usually contains annual vital statistics, including mortality counts).

16 David Kennedy, A. Braga, and A. Piehl, “Developing and Implementing Operation Ceasefire,” in U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project’s Operation Ceasefire* (Washington, D. C., 2001). D.C. See <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/nij/188741.pdf> (visited Jan. 12, 2005).

[HTTP://WWW.LAPDONLINE.ORG](http://www.lapdonline.org): The LAPD website (visited Feb. 3, 2005) lists all of the officers who died while on duty, including twenty-one shot while on duty who did not appear among the seventy-eight in either the coroner's records or the LAPD Robbery/Homicide books. I have no way of accounting for this discrepancy. When the data are aggregated to annual counts, I turn to individual-level observations only to confirm or supplement other official sources (for example, Vital Statistics). However, the individual data provided almost all of the otherwise unreported information, such as weapons, age, gender, or race and ethnicity.